

The Greatest Thing©

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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I couldn't begin to count the number of weddings I've done where this passage has been the one read and preached from. It is such a beautiful masterpiece that Paul has written on love.

But if we only hear its poetic beauty and do not really consider the deep challenge that it puts before us, we are truly missing the point Paul wants to make.

Paul is writing to the Christians in Corinth in this first letter, and if you really listen closely, you can tell that he is put out with these people. They obviously were not getting the point of their new-found faith in Christ.

I know we cannot imagine a congregation bickering and having heated disagreements but that is what was going on in the church in Corinth. These people were quite taken with the spiritual gifts they had witnessed, or received, and they were fighting over which was the greatest!

Some of them had received gifts in their new faith – speaking in other languages, prophecy, healing. Thus Paul starts by saying, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Paul ends the chapter before this one asking, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But, he says, strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

A more excellent way. Above everything else, even more important than any spiritual gifts they might have, or wish they had, is the gift of love.

So often, we use the word love without really thinking about what it means. We say things like “Yes! I love my bed!” or “Wow! I love that sports car.” Or, “MMmmmmm! I love chocolate!” Or, uh, huh.... “I love my sweetheart.”

I used to say “I love strawberries!” and my grandfather, who was a stickler for using the correct words and having good manners, would say to me, “We *like* our tomatoes. We *like* our strawberries. But, we *LOVE* our sweethearts.”

And, although I was not stupid enough to say it out loud, I used to think “WHATEVER!” As a kid, I didn’t have a sweetheart. And I was pretty sure I loved my strawberries ever bit as much as I ever would a sweetheart.

But Paul uses this word *love* in a way that is deeper even than loving our sweethearts. In fact, it is such an intense, deep, and really difficult type of love that I am almost embarrassed to preach about it. I, like most of us humans, fall very short in my ability to love this way.

But this is the type of love we have been given from God, and that we see revealed to us in the Christ. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

This is the perfect love we are given from God. God gives us the very best in Jesus, his Son. Think about it ... how patient God is with us. How many times do I ask for forgiveness ... often for the same old thing ... and usually it has to do with this very subject ... LOVE.

Perhaps I was unreasonable in my irritability with my sweetheart, whom I claim to love with all my heart. (Yes, I changed my mind about loving strawberries more than my sweetheart!)

Perhaps I was impatient with someone on the phone. Maybe I gave up on hoping for the best in a relationship, or, maybe my endurance for being tolerant and giving the benefit of the doubt was not at its highest moment. I so often find myself repenting and asking for forgiveness and a fresh start in the area of love.

Yet, God, in his patience and loving kindness, forgives over and over. At least that is what the Scriptures tell us. Jesus said you should forgive someone, not just 7 times, but 77 times ... an exaggeration to show that forgiveness should constantly be given. (Matthew 18:22)

And the Bible also tells us from “Psalm 103:12
“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”
(NIV)

Loving is an action word. It is something that is a clear mark of a Christian ... that is, someone who follows the one who exemplified this perfect love ... Jesus.

The hymn ***We Are One in the Spirit*** says it so well:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They will know we are Christians by our love

(written by Peter Scholtes additional words and music by Carolyn Arends)

I read a story that was told in a sermon about love. A woman minister in California treats herself once a year at Christmas time to a trip to Nordstroms where there is live Christmas music on all 5 floors. It is very expensive but she loves to go and look at the beautiful things.

One year, she was on the top floor where all the very expensive dresses are and she saw a woman come up the escalator who did not appear to be someone who could shop there.

The woman was dirty, wearing old, ragged clothes. She carried a bag that was loaded with her things ... quite possibly all she had to her name. Her hair was matted and her socks were rolled down to her ankles.

The minister stood and watched as the saleswoman approached the ragged guest. She was curious to see how the saleswoman would react.

The saleswoman surprised her by very politely and respectfully saying, "Welcome to Nordstroms. How may I help you today?"

The woman said, "I want to buy a new dress."

The saleswoman, without batting an eye, said, "Come with me. I'm sure we can find just the right one for you today. We have lots of beautiful dresses for you to try on."

With that, she led the woman to look at several garments, expressing how certain ones would be just right for her skin tone. After picking out several dresses, she invited the woman to go to the dressing room so she could try on the clothes.

The minister went into the room next door and listened, intrigued by the kindness in the saleswoman. Very gently, she heard the saleswoman helping and complimenting the other woman as she tried on the dresses.

Finally, the woman said, "I've changed my mind. I don't think I want to buy a dress today."

And the saleswoman answered her. "That's just fine. Thank you for allowing me to be of service today. Here is my card. If you decide to come back, please ask for me and I would consider it a privilege to help you again."

I was so touched by that story of love. A love that showed kindness and grace; that built up instead of tearing down. It is how I think God has treated us ... all of us who can't always get it right. Yet, he is patient, kind, and full of grace.

We are all challenged to practice this kind of love every day. This love is not a childish, immature love. It is not fickle; not a love that can change, depending on your mood. It is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, nor is it an erotic, romantic feeling. All those are forms of love, but they are not the same as this word Paul uses.

In Greek, there are four different words used that translate as love into English:

Eros (Ἔρως) is love in the sense of 'being in love' or 'loving' someone.

Philia (Greek: φιλία) is the love between friends. Friendship is the strong bond existing between people who share common interest or activity.

Affection (**storge**, στοργή) is fondness through familiarity (a brotherly love), especially between family members

Charity (**agapē**, ἀγάπη) is the love that brings forth caring regardless of the circumstance. C. S. Lewis says this is the greatest of loves, and a specifically Christian virtue. It is sacrificial love, putting others before ourselves. It is the love that God has for God's people.

All of us are challenged to show this great virtue – this agape love – in everything we do – in our relationships and work here in the church and in all our relationships outside of the church. Because, we are the church wherever we go. And they will know we are Christians by our love.

There are many important and virtuous things in this world that are important. Yet, they won't last forever. But real love will. Love ... Agape love is what really matters. It is the sign of our faith and trust in our God who loves us so much.

Paul says, now faith, hope and love abide. But the greatest of these is love.